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SUBJECT: HERO TALABANI ON SOCIAL ISSUES IN IRAQI KURDISTAN

Classified By: Classified by Acting RRT Leader Anne Patterson for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

This is a Regional Reconstruction Team (RRT) Cable.

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Hero Talabani, wife of Jalal Talabani, the President of Iraq and leader of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), runs a TV station in Iraqi Kurdistan, edits newspapers and leads charities. Her main concerns are the negative trends generated in Iran that impact Iraqi Kurdistan society, the rights of children and women, the need to increase skilled labor, and openness in the media. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) On July 2, RRT Off met with Hero Talabani (nee Hero Ibrahim Ahmed) at her residence in Sulaimaniyah Province. She runs KurdSat, a TV station in Iraqi Kurdistan, edits numerous publications and leads charities such as Kurdistan Save the Children.

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IRAN

¶3. (C) Hero Talabani told RRTOff that Iran is a source of instability for Iraq. She pointed to the trend of importing glue and illicit drugs from Iran that street children in Baghdad consume. The availability of hashish and heroin has stimulated trade in these substances, she added. Drugs were usually transited through Iraq, she said, but recently Iraqis are drug consumers. Although the Asayish (Iraqi Kurdistan intelligence service) is effective at arresting the perpetrators, the trend from Iran continues, she noted. Mrs. Talabani suggested an awareness campaign be launched to educate the rural areas of Iraqi Kurdistan on the dangers of drug use.

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SAVE THE CHILDREN

¶4. (C) Mrs. Talabani is particularly active in the organization Kurdistan Save the Children (KSC), which has offices in Sulaimaniyah province and Baghdad. She announced that KSC offices will soon open in Dohuk and Erbil and will receive financing from the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). When questioned if KSC coordinates with Islamic charitable organizations on children's issues, she said that KSC used to work with them but broke off relations in an effort to offer assistance without regard to religious affiliation. Mrs. Talabani said the Islamic associations require young girls to wear headscarves and are trying to influence the children with a particular religious tradition. She emphasized children should be free from having a religion imposed on them.

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YOUTH AND EMPLOYMENT

¶5. (C) The youth lack a solid education and employment opportunities, Mrs. Talabani explained. The curriculum in higher education is out of date and not rich in foreign sources, she said. The teaching staff is limited in its world view and has not adequately prepared the youth of Sulaimaniyah for the modern labor market.

¶6. (C) Once an agricultural-based economy, Hero Talabani highlighted the problem of the youth in rural areas who once entered into the agricultural sector. Present-day farmers have few skills or modern machinery and farming does not attract the new generation. Mrs. Talabani stated that the youth today prefer jobs in the police force in urban centers.

¶7. (C) Mrs. Talabani stated urbanization, along with the Oil-for-Food program of the United Nations, has impoverished the rural areas of Iraqi Kurdistan and left the agricultural sector dependent on imports. The Iraqi Kurdistan provinces no longer produce sugar and basic foodstuffs because these local markets phased out their operations since the UN provided these products, she said. Oil-for-Food also had cultural consequences: residents lost their ability to cultivate local seeds and select what they need at the market and adjust their diet and budget to seasonal varieties. (Note: The Ba'athist destruction of rural villages is also cited as a cause of agricultural deterioration in the region. End note.)

¶8. (C) In addition to the agricultural sector, Hero Talabani stressed the need to absorb the youth in urban centers by increasing their opportunities to become skilled laborers in fields such as engineering and construction. The problem is

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training the youth, Mrs. Talabani added, and the vocational school set up in Erbil by the Korean Coalition Forces is an excellent model. Unfortunately, the KRG, did not agree to a Korean presence in Sulaimaniyah Province.

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POLITICAL OUTLOOK  
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¶9. (C) When questioned on her outlook for the future of Iraqi politics, Hero Talabani said she was optimistic. She stated that the greatest fear Kurds have is a weak central government. (Note: the Kurds in Baghdad act uninterested in a strong central government, preferring to negotiate for more regional powers in the Iraqi Constitution and laws like hydrocarbons. End Note). As far as any political role she may exercise, she mentioned that often PUK leaders, including reformists, confide in her and see her opinion. She said they listen to her even if she is quick to point out issues and practices of corruption of local officials. She noted that officials fear being the brunt of political satirical humor in one of her publications "Sekhuma" ("jab").

¶10. COMMENT (C) Hero Talabani's years in the mountains and Peshmerga service earned her the respect of the people and within the old guard of the PUK. She is also seen as a regional philanthropist ) assisting local artists, renovating buildings, and overseeing community projects. Her esteemed place in society also stems from her documentaries on mountain life and her advocacy work for women's and children's rights. Hero Talabani, like her famous father, Ibrahim Ahmed (1914-2000), is perceived as a defender of Kurdish history and identity.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES  
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¶11. (C) Hero Talabani was born into an intellectual-political family. Her mother was from Zakho, Dohuk Province and her father, Ibrahim Ahmed is from

Sulaimaniyah. Ibrahim Ahmed was an Iraqi-Kurdish poet, political essayist and author. He was one of the founders and Secretary-General of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) from 1947-58. Some sources claim Ibrahim Ahmed coined the term "Peshmerga" in the 1940s. Hero Talabani spent a part of her childhood in the Kurdish mountains with her father who lived there in exile in the 1960s. When the KDP split in 1964, Ibrahim Ahmed along with his protege Jalal Talabani broke away from Mustafa Barzani, now President of Iraqi Kurdistan. Jalal Talabani founded the PUK in 1975.

¶12. (C) Hero Talabani returned to the mountains and became a Peshmerga in the late 1970s. In the 1980s she started filming the everyday lives of Kurdish villagers under daily bombardment by Saddam. She is known for her film footage documenting the 1986-87 Anfal campaign - chemical attacks, ordered by Saddam in the Kurdish north.  
CROCKER